

# The Fibreculture Journal

DIGITAL MEDIA + NETWORKS + TRANSDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE



## FCJ-145 Temporal Utopianism and Global Information Networks

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There is no such thing as utopia. But without utopianism we cannot begin to address some of the global political problems that the first decade of this millennium has magnified. This is manifest in a widespread perception of increasing environmental degradation, a seemingly permanent state of emergency in the so-called 'War on Terror' and growing instability in the world economy. How to explain this contradiction? Even those intellectuals like Mary Midgley (1996; 2003), who skilfully dismantle the idea that utopia could ever be possible or even desirable, believe that a conception of a perfect society, however naïve and flawed, is a useful motivation for progressive political activity: 'If we try to work with a world-view which shows us only the complexity of existing facts, we lose our bearings and forget where we are going' (Midgley, 1996: 25). This is all the more important when we consider the capacity that utopianism has for mobilising people, not only for progressive political projects but for more reactionary ones. [1]

This paper will begin with an analysis of the genealogy of utopianism, central to which will be an exploration of the significance of concepts of time and space. It will explain in particular why in different periods time-based utopias are favoured; why, in others, space-based utopias are the norm. In relation to this, the paper will analyse the key debates within modernity about time and space. Through an exploration of two theorists in particular, Paul Virilio and Manuel Castells, it will be argued that the manipulation of time is one of the important aspects of modern societies. As such any discussion about utopia must have a temporal rather than spatial focus. In the early 1990s the rise of the network society led to the introduction of new social theories which were informational in nature, many of which were utopian. The crudity of many of those theories should not rule out utopianism as a useful concept and guide to action in our increasingly unstable world. This paper will therefore ask whether it is possible to fashion a temporal utopianism as a means of addressing some of humankind's most intractable

problems. This will be done with an analysis of the capacity of computer networks to effect political change, with a focus on global economics.

## What is utopia?

Since the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* in 1516, utopian writing has become so prominent that it now constitutes its own genre, confined not only to novels but also flourishing in academic discourse and politics. The resilience of this idea is hard to comprehend in light of the seeming epistemological impossibility of the realisation of such a society, reinforced by the dearth of successful empirical examples of utopia in practice. There is a whole body of literature that addresses the first issue, the complexity of which does not need repeating here (John Gray, 2007; Isaiah Berlin, 1991; Mary Midgley, 1996 and 2003). For the purpose of this paper there is, though, merit in highlighting the main arguments against utopia, namely: that it is simply not possible to resolve completely the tensions and contradictions in everyday life, especially where positive values compete with one another – in Isaiah Berlin's (1991: 12) famous phrase 'total liberty for wolves is death to the lambs'; that even if it were possible to eradicate all these tensions and contradictions, the removal of the human desire to compete and to make choices would make life very boring; political ideas that try to lift themselves beyond the quotidian reality of our lives tend to mutate into totalitarianism. (In relation to the latter point, it is worth citing Russell Jacoby's [2005: xiii] argument that anti-utopian intellectuals like Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt's disillusionment with Marxism, to which they were previously sympathetic, led them to criticise all utopian thinking; though Jacoby himself is not convinced by their arguments).

There is also little empirical evidence to support the idea that utopia can be realised in practice. It is unarguable that utopia has not been realised at a national or global level, but there are examples of attempts to form and sustain perfect societies at various times and places. In the USA, the counter-culture movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s established its own communes outside what it perceived as the military-industrial complex of the country at large, Judson Jerome estimating that these numbered around 10,000 by the early 1970s and contained some 750,000 inhabitants (Fred Turner, 2006: 32). But despite their egalitarian ideals, these communes found it difficult to escape the racial tensions that bedevilled wider society at that time and also relegated women to the margins (Turner, 2006: 76-78). While there are still some communes flourishing in the United States, the idea of opting out of society in contemporary America tends to be associated with the largely, though not exclusively, right-wing militia movement (Manuel Castells 2010b). Generally, it is hard to argue with Jacoby's (2005: 4) assertion that: 'The history of utopian communities is largely a history of failure'.

## Is utopianism a futile political project?

That the seeming epistemic impossibility of building a utopia appears to have been empirically validated by the failure of utopian communes invites the question: why bother with utopianism as a political project? The logic of the above would seem to suggest that we can only answer such a question in the negative. However, what if we respond to this question with another one: what are the characteristics of a politics that has eradicated all traces of utopian thinking? One of the features of anti-utopian thought is that it struggles to offer a vision of society that is elevated beyond quotidian concerns (Jacoby, 2005: 54-57). But a latter-day anti-utopian like John Gray (2003; 2007) would not accept this as a problem, arguing that all grand political schemes, however well-meaning, are ultimately doomed to failure and therefore focusing on the quotidian is all we can do - Gray's arguments, like many other anti-utopians, are ground in a critique of the Enlightenment, not particularly unusual in our post-modern times.

Mary Midgley rejects this narrow view of politics, arguing that we need to think holistically in order to comprehend the complexity of human society. Commenting on Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, Utopia*, she writes that:

*Of course Nozick is right to warn us against seizing on a single one of these visions exclusively and forcing its pattern on society. But he means to do more than that. He wants to dissuade us from using any such vast and remote views of ideals at all. He calls on us to take up a standpoint which is wholly empirical, realistic and dream-free (Midgley, 1996: 23; my emphasis).*

The last sentence identifies the most problematic element of anti-utopianism in modern society. The entry into the academic mainstream of critiques of Enlightenment ideas specifically and the promotion of postmodernism generally have not led to more open societies; on the contrary, our working lives are increasingly bureaucratic, we are surveilled more comprehensively than ever before by CCTV cameras and electronic databases, and in Iraq and Afghanistan there has been a return to the type of imperial adventurism that the western world supposedly had long ago banished – not to mention the death and destruction caused by other conflicts fuelled by nationalism, religion and the struggle for resources. As discussed above, the increasing surveillance and bureaucratic control of our lives could be a result of what Midgley criticises. That is, it is the consequence of 'empirical' modes of organisation moving into the vacuum created by the increasing unwillingness of progressive politicians and philosophers to provide leadership based on vision. While anti-utopians would reject the view that their philosophy is in any way responsible for these

trends, the argument that they are the consequence of leaving the field of ideas open to political activists who do think in utopian terms is a strong one.

In relation to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Gray (2003; 2007) argues that the Bush administration was not only motivated by the *realpolitik* of securing the region's oil supplies, but that its messianism in wanting to export western-style democracy worldwide was a manifestation of utopianism in action. But in equating all utopian thinking with its most egregious manifestations, Gray is blind to the potential that utopianism has in providing effective counter-arguments to the excesses of its most malign practitioners. Indeed, if Gray is correct that many of the problems in contemporary society result from faulty utopianism, then how might we counteract this? Gray would argue that we do this by rejecting utopianism outright. However, as Amartya Sen (2007) has so persuasively argued, the dismissal of Enlightenment thinking (which many anti-utopians equate with utopianism) as merely western universalism is not only wrong but it potentially deprives the oppressed of the world a useful conceptual tool in their fight for justice. In this sense, Sen thinks that universal values are more useful than what he describes as the 'solitarism' of identity politics. This is not to say that all anti-utopians practice identity politics - though some do. However, there is a danger in progressive thinkers' ditching of grand narratives, both as a means by which we understand the world and as a basis for political action. This danger is that those of our species (most of us?) who seek explanations of, and solutions to, their problems will be more susceptible to more reactionary ideas and movements. The latter are, of course, nearly always framed within a grandiose worldview. But if we are to fashion a utopia, what shape might it take? Central to this question is utopianism's complex relationship to time and space, to which the essay will now turn.

## A spatial or temporal utopia?

Thomas More created the word utopia out of the Greek words *ou* and *topos*, to mean literally 'no place' (More, 1992: 3). Thus from the outset utopia had a spatial association, a view reinforced by More's Utopia being an island. Fredric Jameson has argued that this spatial element is important metaphorically for utopian thought, the island providing conceptual separation from, and thus a totality untainted by, other ideas:

*Totality is then precisely this combination of closure and system, in the name of autonomy and self-sufficiency and which is ultimately the source of that otherness or radical, even alien, difference. (Jameson, 2005: 5)*

It was therefore no coincidence that early utopias, like for instance, Francis Bacon's seventeenth century creation *New Atlantis*, were based on islands and/or on previously undiscovered lands. But while the nineteenth century witnessed an upsurge in utopian writing, it became less spatially and more temporally orientated, with novels like H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* being published.

What were the reasons for this temporal turn in the genre? Northrop Frye argues that it became virtually impossible after the industrial revolution in Britain to write about utopia without putting technology at centre-stage:

*And because technology is progressive, getting to the utopia has tended increasingly to be a journey in time rather than space, a vision of the future and not of a society located in some isolated spot on the globe (or outside it: journeys to the moon are a very old form of fiction, and some of them are utopian) (Frye, 1992: 207).*

This argument, though, is problematic in that it equates technology with progressive politics, smacking almost of technological determinism. Frye is on surer ground when he asserts that:

*A certain amount of claustrophobia enters this argument when it is realized, as it is from about 1850 on, that technology tends to unify the whole world. The conception of an isolated utopia like that of More or Plato or Bacon gradually evaporates in the face of this fact (Frye, 1992: 208).*

## Spatial utopia and the computer network

There is a paradox here in that humans' apparent mastery of global place and space has developed in contradistinction to their inability to control time, a phenomena that has become seemingly more pronounced in our modern networked societies. Does this mean that the utopianism has shifted more decisively from a spatial to temporal register? If we think specifically of the genre of cyber-utopianism, the answer is no. The term cyberspace was coined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, and much of this genre explores the new seemingly limitless space that the World Wide Web provides for exploration both physically and conceptually (Turner, 2006: 162-163). Yet much of this literature is dystopian in tenor. It is the realm of politics and business that much of contemporary utopianism is situated. [2] The idea that the World Wide Web as a space offers new ways

of doing business and politics is durable across genres. A good example is *Wired*. Devoted to all things digital, online magazine *Wired* is a platform for cyber-utopianism. The highly speculative nature of many of its articles means that *Wired* is influential in bringing utopian ideas about the development of the World Wide Web into mainstream American society and further afield. Indeed, many of *Wired's* writers, like Kevin Kelly, Nicholas Negroponte, and Chris Anderson have become highly successful in business, academia and journalism. And for many of these writers, space, and its supposed limitation in modernist form, is a crucial element of their philosophy. Thus in Negroponte's 1995 book *Being Digital* the author writes about how digital technology can release 'kids ... from the limitation of geographic proximity as the sole basis of friendship, collaboration, play and neighbourhood' and 'can be a natural force driving people into greater world harmony' (Negroponte, 1995: 230). Kelly's intellectual interests are too wide-ranging to do justice in this short section but suffice it to say that much of his writing is also concerned with the way in which cyberspace can overcome the supposed limitations of our modernist conception of space. Kelly (2006) champions the attempts by Google and others to digitise all the world's books, a classic example for him of how cyberspace can manipulate space by bringing together texts from locations around the world and putting them in one place, cyberspace, where they can be viewed by everyone. Chris Anderson's hugely influential article and book, *The Long Tail*, is based on a similar conception of the transformation of space:

*Hit-driven economics is a creation of an age without enough room to carry everything for everybody. Not enough shelf space for all the CDs, DVDs, and games produced. Not enough screens to show all the available movies. Not enough channels to broadcast all the TV programs, not enough radio waves to play all the music created, and not enough hours in the day to squeeze everything out through either of those sets of slots.*

*This is the world of scarcity. Now, with online distribution and retail, we are entering a world of abundance. And the differences are profound (Anderson, 2004: 2).*

Anderson's main argument is that traditional economic theories are not applicable to a world where there is an abundance of space, where the increasing immateriality of our goods mean that markets are no longer constrained by the incapacity of storage space and physical platforms to expand beyond a certain point without investing in huge amounts of capital and acquisition of land. One of the most popular expositions of these ideas is Thomas Friedman's (2006) *The World is Flat*, a paean to the virtues of the supposed new, frictionless capitalism.

Do these new tendencies suggest that we should now think of utopianism only in spatial terms? I would argue not. Most of these valorisations of the new economy were written before the global downturn in 2008. In this sense, they lack empirical validation. The most crucial aspect of their empirical faultiness is in their relation to space, which results from a fundamental mis-reading of computer networks, whose relationship to space is a little more complicated than the supposition that these provide limitless capacity for the storage and dissemination of information. This is not to say that the World Wide Web, like earlier communication technologies before it, has not fundamentally re-altered our concept of space, but it has done so in a far more subtle way than Kelly, Anderson, Negroponce and Friedman have suggested. But before this is addressed in a comprehensive way, the essay will first discuss some earlier theoretical formulations of the relationship between space and time in what Anthony Giddens (1991) refers to as the period of 'high modernism'.

## Space in High Modernism

As the earlier discussion on the genealogy of utopianism suggests, since the beginning of human history the triangular relationship between human beings, time and space has been constantly, if at times imperceptibly, re-calibrated. This means that any re-calibration wrought by our newest communication technologies should be viewed within the context of this longer history of change, rather than as a unique intervention. Giddens (1991) argues that the major difference between pre-modern and what he refers to high modern societies is in the way in which time and space have a close relationship in the former, but are separated in the latter. The consequence of this for social organisation is that, in the latter, institutions and practices become 'disembedded', that is to say 'lifted out' of what previously was their specific locale (Giddens, 1991: 17-18). Globalisation has accentuated this distancing and disembedding, though as he was writing in 1991, Giddens would not then have been able to appreciate the extent to which the World Wide Web would accelerate this trend.

Zygmunt Bauman (2000) argues in a similar vein, though his preferred term 'liquid modernity' emphasises the fluidity of contemporary social life. He provides further explication in his contrasting of 'heavy modernity' and its successor, 'light modernity' (Bauman, 2000: 113). The former is dependent on heavy machinery generating large products which endure over time and in working environments where the relationship between employers and labour is, if not stable, mutually dependent and long-term. In the latter, the emphasis is on knowledge work with its production of things like software, where employers need no longer be tied to labour beyond the short-term (Bauman, 2000: 116-117). For Bauman, the most important factor in this transformation is humans' conquering of space. But Bauman is not referring



to all humans here: the 'fluid' nature of modernity enables capital, employers and some employees to escape the constraints of space, but their mastery depends on the inability of the majority of people to do so:

People who move and act faster, who come nearest to the momentariness of movement, are now the people who rule. And it is the people who cannot move as quickly, and more conspicuously yet the category of people who cannot at will leave their place at all, who are ruled. Domination consists in one's own capacity to escape, to disengage, to 'be elsewhere', and the right to decide the speed with which all that is done – while simultaneously stripping the people on the dominated side of their ability to arrest or constrain their moves or slow them down. The contemporary battle of domination is waged between forces armed, respectively, with the weapons of acceleration and procrastination (Bauman, 2000: 119-120).

Like Giddens, but more explicitly, Bauman is arguing that the mastery of space by time enables instantaneous decisions to be made in business and social life, but that it only benefits those not tied to place.

## Time in High Modernism (Manuel Castells's Timeless Time)

The capacity of time to conquer space, and the power that that gives it, is one of the major concerns of theorist of *dromology*, Paul Virilio. Virilio's work is unapologetically pessimistic, constantly warning the reader of the distinct possibility of a major catastrophe. [3] As long ago as 1977, he argued: 'The reduction of distances has become a strategic reality bearing incalculable economic and political consequences, since it corresponds to the negation of space' (Virilio, 1986: 134). Despite mentioning economics and politics, Virilio at this time was mainly concerned with the potential for nuclear catastrophe. Musing that in the future the warning time for nuclear missiles could be less than a minute, he argued that this would give heads of state no time to make decisions and hence would effectively lead to the automation of war; in other words, the evacuation of politics from the most important decision that a head of state would ever have to make (Virilio, 1986: 139-140):

*If only yesterday the freedom of maneuver (that aptitude for movement which has been equated with the aptitude for war) occasionally required delegations of power up to the secondary echelons, the reduction of the margin of maneuver due to the progress of the means of communicating destruction causes an extreme*



*concentration of responsibilities for the solitary decision-maker that the Chief of State has become. This contraction is, however, far from being complete; it continues according to the arms race, at the speed of the new capacities of the vectors, until one day it will dispossess this last man. In fact, the movement is the same that restrains the number of projectiles and that reduces to nothing or almost nothing the decision of an individual deprived of counsel. The maneuver is the same as the one that today leads us to abandon territories and advanced bases, and as the one that will one day lead us to renounce solitary human decision in favor of the absolute miniaturization of the political field which is automation (Virilio, 1986: 148-149).*

While his later work is also concerned with the dangers of nuclear catastrophe, he devotes more time than he does in his earlier works to the impact of instantaneity on global economics, arguing that the impetus towards deregulation and the creation of financial instruments based more on complex mathematical formulae rather than real wealth threatens to automate economics in the same way that military decision-making is increasingly automated, a phenomenon he conceptualises as the 'information bomb' (Virilio, 2000).

Despite this turn towards economics, Virilio's work is mainly inflected with an apocalyptic hue. While one can never be too complacent in a world where increasing nuclear proliferation could lead to maligned non-state actors getting their hands on nuclear devices, the world has learned to live, if always uneasily, with weapons of mass destruction. The USA and the UK's protracted, and many would argue unsuccessful, engagements in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which seem not to differ much in military character from nineteenth century imperial ventures, fatally undermine the thesis that modern wars can be solely 'informational.' It is true that the increased use of pilotless drones controlled by operators back in the United States have proved to be effective weapons, but they have not been decisive in overcoming the resistance of those whose political will is stronger than their available technology.

However, amidst the global financial crisis of 2008 where, in the UK at least, the banking system was only hours away from total collapse (Andrew Rawnsley, 2010: 575-597) Virilio almost lived to see a major global catastrophe. While the application of his theory to the potential of nuclear catastrophe is suspect – it is more likely that nuclear weapons will be detonated deliberately by a rogue state or non-state actor than by accident – a collapse of the global financial system as it is presently constituted is not inconceivable. Any contemporary utopian project therefore cannot ignore the networked nature of global economics and the weaknesses therein, and who better to turn to for a guide to its complexity than Manuel Castells?

Like Virilio, Castells's intellectual interests lie in the study of the domination of global time over global space, which he encapsulates in the new concept of 'timeless time'; though he is more sanguine than Virilio about these changes. What is timeless time? Castells's theory of the network society is based on making a distinction between 'flows' and 'places'. In what he terms the 'space of flows' (of capital and expertise) timeless time rules, while in 'the space of places' (locations essentially on the margins of the global networks) modernist time prevails (Castells, 2010: 498). Similar to Bauman's idea that 'fluid' modernity provides elites with the mobility to disengage from their host societies, Castells (2010: 460-499) argues that it is those who live on timeless time who prevail over those who are tied to specific locales. Like Virilio, he argues that conflict, at least for those who adhere to the rhythm of timeless time, is swift, informational and results in few casualties for the victor; he uses the 1991 Gulf War and the NATO's defeat of Yugoslavia in 1999 with air power alone as examples to support his thesis (Castells, 2010: 486-487). And like Virilio, events in the last decade, where the Rumsfeld doctrine of waging wars with a small number of 'smart' soldiers died in the graveyards of Iraq, have provided an empirical rebuke to that part of his thesis; something Castells mentions only in passing in the 2010 preface to the updated second edition of his book (Castells, 2010: xli).

But he is on surer ground with his analysis of the informational nature of contemporary economics. Here, deregulation on a global scale and the creation of ever more complicated financial instruments to enable capital to exploit this new global architecture have conquered space to the extent that even the most powerful nation-states find it difficult to control their own economies. There are various reasons for this development, but arguably the most significant is the use of new information technologies:

*[The first reason for the global financial crisis of 2008 was] the technological transformation of finance that provided the basis for the constitution of a global financial market around global computer networks, and equipped financial institutions with computational capacity to operate advanced mathematical models. These models were deemed capable of managing the increasing complexity of the financial system, operating globally interdependent financial markets through electronic transactions effected at lightning speed (Castells, 2010: xix-xx).*

Is this Virilio's 'information bomb'? At the very least, it appears to validate Midgley's (1996: 23) warning of sleep-walking towards a society 'which is wholly empirical, realistic and dream-free' (my emphasis).

Whilst we now know that this financial positivism - the idea that the world economy can be precisely measured and successfully manipulated with complicated mathematical formulae

and advanced computer networks - is fundamentally flawed, is it possible to use these computer networks for more progressive ends? How might a new temporal utopianism address the systemic failures of our present global informational financial order? To answer this requires a consideration of the actual impact that these global movements of information have on individuals.

## What to do?

Most traditional approaches to economics highlight the importance of information, particularly in relation to price transparency. In this sense, the writers at *Wired* and those of a similar ilk believe that we are approaching the point where new communication technologies can give consumers perfect information about every single product and thus form the perfect market. But the situation in our contemporary economies is more akin to that of Virilio's 'information bomb', where misinformation has the whip-hand over transparency, than to an environment where perfect information flows without hindrance. As Castells (2010: xx) argues in relation to the 2008 financial crisis:

*new financial technologies made possible the invention of numerous exotic financial products, as derivatives, futures, options, and securitized insurance (such as credit default swaps) became increasingly complex and intertwined, ultimately virtualizing capital and eliminating any semblance of transparency in the markets so that accounting procedures became meaningless. ... financial markets only partially function according to the logic of supply and demand, and are largely shaped by "information turbulences", ... the mortgage crisis that started in 2007 in the United States after the bursting of the real-estate bubble reverberated throughout the global financial system. (my emphasis)*

One of the most striking aspects of global cross-border trade is how much of it takes place *within* multinational corporations, up to two-thirds according to Nicholas Shaxson (2011, 12). The significance of this is that it enables 'transfer pricing' or, perhaps more aptly, 'transfer mispricing', where by 'artificially adjusting the price for the internal transfer, multinationals can shift profits into a low-tax haven and costs into high-tax countries where they can be deducted against tax' (Shaxson, 2011: 11-12; emphasis in the original). This is empirical validation of Castells and Bauman's argument that the most important effect of what the former terms 'the network society' and the latter 'fluid modernity' is that differential access to information enables global elites to further distance themselves from the vast majority of the citizens on this planet. [4]

Shaxson (2011: 279-281) argues that the best way of addressing the problem of differential access is through the introduction of new corporate duties to disclose information and global agreements at governmental level to improve the transparency of financial information. Following Bauman and Castells, Viktor Mayer-Schonberger (2009) argues that one of the most important ways in which our newest communication technologies encourage differential access to information is through their capacity, primarily through social networking and message boards, to provide detail on many more aspects of individuals' lives than would have been the case in the past. Mayer-Schonberger's book begins with a story of a 25 year old trainee teacher whose university refused to give her a certificate at the end of her training because it had discovered on the World Wide Web a photograph of her drunk (Mayer-Schonberger, 2009: 1-2). While this is an extreme case, it provides further empirical validation of Castells and Bauman's concerns about differential access to information. Mayer-Schonberger's (2009) solution is that there should be legally enforced expiry dates for online personal information. Taken together, and if implemented, Shaxson and Mayer-Schonberger's proposals would go a long way to address the differential access to information between global elites and the majority of the world's citizens. This would constitute temporal utopianism insofar as, to cite Bauman's (2000: 119-120) earlier point, it would help to redress the imbalance between those who in 'fluid modernity' can exploit their privileged access to information to 'move and act faster' and those whose access is more restricted.

There is, though, a strong argument against this approach: namely that these changes are in the gift of the self-same global elites who have benefited from the accretion of this power. Events since 2008 seem to have borne this out, with politicians from even the world's strongest economies seemingly powerless or unwilling to reform the global financial architecture responsible for the crisis. This calls for a consideration of the tactics that political activists can use to put pressure on global elites to reform the global financial system. This call for reform may appear conservative in its implied rejection of a revolutionary stance. While many of the most important global financial actors - like the world's most powerful nations, the IMF, multinational corporations and credit ratings agencies - are in need of structural overhaul, even very few of the most trenchant and eloquent critics of global capitalism believe that it is on the brink of collapse; [5] in this sense, political energy should not be wasted on impossibilist demands that bring either merely the self-satisfaction in the purity of one's ideas or the disillusionment of great hopes dashed. But such is the dearth of widely supported intellectual challenges to the present economic system, even the mere global popularisation of a serious alternative to the present system can be viewed as utopian.

## Tactical media

But if we believe that reform is possible, what tactics might be used to help bring this about? Successful tactics must address the temporal logic of our existing global information architecture. That is to say, rather than trying to turn the clock back to a less technologically-saturated age, activists must find ways of using the global and temporal nature of the network to help to reform the system. Tactical media is adept in using the global information networks to cause temporary disruption. This is a manifestation of what physicist Brian Ridley (2001) argues: that in their temporal instability the dynamic nature of networks should be embraced for their potential to construct forms of public decision-making which can respond more rapidly than representative democracy to societal demands for change; a form of time-bound utopia if you will. Ridley's approach is compatible with the much earlier critiques of traditional utopianism offered by Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin in the 1920s. Zamyatin stressed that traditional utopianism is static in nature – it is based on the teleological approach that once the perfect society has been attained then there is no further need for political change (Jacoby, 2005: 11-12). The contemporary environment can no longer endorse a traditional utopian activism, instead tactics must address the temporal as well as the spatial inequalities of the network.

What has come to be conceptualised as tactical media chalked up its first major success with the dropping of the multi-lateral agreement on investment (MAI) in 1998. The following year's WTO summit at Seattle attracted thousands of protestors, who used new media technologies to organise quickly *en masse*. But after their initial unpreparedness, governments have become more adept at thwarting mass protests at multi-nation meetings and, more importantly, the pace of the global expansion of capital did not abate. [6] There have been other tactical media campaigns that have captured global attention, 'Wikileaks' being one of the most prominent in recent years. As its name suggests, Wikileaks provides a receptacle for leaked, classified information, in the same way that Wikipedia provides a receptacle for amateur experts on all subjects. While the leaking of this information has caused some consternation among powerful nations, especially where it has revealed unflattering depictions of one country by another, it has not, though, really had much effect on traditional forms of international diplomacy.

The limited success of Wikileaks highlights the weaknesses of tactical media as presently constituted within the frameworks of utopia. While the revealing of damaging information can cause considerable harm to individuals, in and of itself it is less effective as a means of causing political change. Further, the extent to which it can lead to political change is not always progressive. Two examples will suffice. The revealing of ever more intimate details of politicians' private lives, as Matt Drudge did in relation to Bill Clinton in the mid-1990s,

can have the conservative outcome of focusing debate on individuals' behaviour rather than a discussion about the efficacy of our political institutions. Consider another example, that of London's *Daily Telegraph* revealing in painstakingly incremental fashion the details of British MPs' expense claims which it could be argued conveniently diverted attention from widespread calls for reform of the financial services sector. This is not to say that information transparency is not a good thing, but that it does not necessarily bring about progressive political change. In order to do that, disruption of the networks themselves is needed.

Jacoby (2005) argues that while anti-utopians rail against utopian blueprints, the best utopias are 'iconoclastic', being not concerned with detailing every aspect of the perfect society, but rather championing specific ideals to which all can aspire. Measures like Shaxson's and Mayer-Schonberger's may not appear to be all that utopian, but they are part of the terrain on which the political battles are being increasingly fought in the so-called information age and on which tactical media activists should now focus more of their attention. While it is not necessary to subscribe to the view that the rapid development of new media technologies has rendered traditional conceptions of 'right' and 'left' obsolete, their convulsive effect has made identification of specific causes to either traditional pole more difficult than would have been the case decades ago. An example of this was the heated debate over the introduction of ID cards in the UK, with opposition voices discussing the iniquities of government databases in seeming ignorance of the existence of powerful, unregulated databases in private hands. Indeed, many writers and activists, like Shaxson and Mayer-Schonberger, are waking up to the power of unregulated global information networks themselves. This is illustrated in the greater attention that has been given over the last few years to the information-gathering operations of large corporations, mainly but not exclusively Google, and their effect on wider society. [7] Tactical media, then, has a dual, if somewhat paradoxical, role to play in using global information networks as the most effective means of calling for the reform of those self-same networks to make them better serve the needs of those outside the global elites.

## Conclusion

Why should we be concerned about (a utopian) reform of global information networks when tackling our ongoing economic crisis seems infinitely more important? The simple answer, as argued throughout this piece, is that it is difficult to separate the two. Also, as Scott Lash recognised as long ago as 2002, our immersion in new media technologies makes it harder to fashion a strategy from 'outside':

*The point I want to make is that critique has always involved a transcendental, another separate space from which critical reflection can be launched. My argument in this book [Critique of information] is that such critique is no longer possible. The global information order itself has, it seems to me, erased and swallowed up into itself all transcendentals. There is no outside space any more for such critical reflection. And there is just as little time. There is no escaping from the information order, thus the critique of information will have to come from inside the information itself (2002, vii).*

Tactical media is useful in disrupting the system temporarily, but those who control global information networks are becoming increasingly adept at thwarting activists. The key, then, to a utopian strategy is not to jettison the dynamic elements of global information networks, for the speed with which it sends information can be also be used against it, as it was successfully in the late 1990s. The success of a temporal utopianism within the networked society depends on progressive activists and academics being able to identify the aspects of networks which enable global elites to exist in a different, superior, temporality to the mass of humanity, and using those self-same networks as a means both of rapidly publicising these inequities and building fluid progressive coalitions in support of appropriate reforms.

## Biographical Note

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## Notes

[1] An example of this is John Gray's (2007) extended discussion of the significant influence of millenarianism on utopian thought throughout the ages.

[2] Like much of this contemporary literature, *Neuromancer* is more dystopian than utopian. Many anti-utopians like John Gray will argue that there is nothing to distinguish these terms from each other, because all utopianism in practice will lead to a dystopian outcome. This position is eloquently dismantled by Russell Jacoby (2005) and thus this essay will treat



utopianism and dystopianism as distinct entities.

[3] In one of his later works, *City of Panic*, his translator argues that while Virilio acknowledges the benefits of new technologies he is happy to 'let others crow about the advantages; he is here to point out the downside, the shipwreck that is part and parcel of the ship ...' (Rose, 2005: x).

[4] In recent years there has been much coverage in the world's media of the mobile telephone revolution in Africa, the subtext being that the so-called digital divide between developed and developing nations will in the not too distant future narrow to insignificance (see, for instance, many articles on this theme in the *Economist* in the last few years). But, as Shaxson (2011) illustrates, at the root of the continent's problems are the huge, largely secret, capital outflows which the networked global economy facilitates, something which will not be solved merely by giving Africans better access to digital technologies.

[5] See, for instance, Alex Callinicos's (2010) cautious concluding paragraph to *Bonfire of Illusions*, which begins: 'We are still a long way from overturning capitalism even in one country. Indeed, the more one seeks to elaborate on the shape of an alternative to capitalism the more one is overawed by the immensity of the task.'

[6] For useful accounts of tactical media's strengths and limitations, see Jeffrey Juris (2008), Geert Lovink (2008) and Rachel Raley (2009).

[7] Recent books which explore the implications of the impact of the growth of large commercial computer networks on wider society include David Berry (2011), Alex Halavais (2008), Zizi Papacharissi (2010), Mark Poster (2006) and Said Vaidhyanathan (2011).

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